EXCISE

FOREIGN SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

755.00/4-2750

SECURITY: SECRET PRIORITY: AIR POUCH

TO: DEPARTMENT OF STATE

FROM: BRUSSELS 583 4/27/50

REF: Embassy Secret Despatch 289 of March 4, 1950

SUBJECT: The Belgian Royal Question; Popular Consultation of March 12 on the Return of Leopold III, and the Political Crisis Thereafter.

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1. THE POPULAR CONSULTATION

On March 12, pursuant to the Law of February 11, 1950, all Belgians over twenty-one years of age went to the polls to vote "Yes" or "No" on one question which would serve to guide Parliament in its eventual decision on the restoration or the continued exile of King LEOPOLD III. This question was--"Are you of the opinion that King Leopold III should again take up the exercise of his constitutional powers?"

a. Last Minute Maneuvers

Immediately prior to this official Gallup poll or quasi-plebiscite there were frantic last minute maneuvers [redacted] B-1 A renewed attempt was made to inject the element of outside interest into the campaign and considerable publicity was given in the press to a document made public by the King's Confidential Secretary, Professor PIRENNE, relating to the allegation that the American Commanders who had liberated King Leopold and his family in 1945 had been ordered to prevent the King's return to Belgium at that time. Newspapers gave publicity to a letter from the Princesse Noailles de LIGNE, dated February 27, 1950, and addressed to M. Pirenne, in which she claimed that while in the presence of the American Ambassador to Brussels in 1945, Mr. SAWYER, the latter had learned that General PATCH had received orders not to permit the King to return to his country.1/ A communiqué was thereupon issued by the Eyskens' Cabinet, stating that the present Belgian Government knew nothing of this event, adding that both the

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R. McClintock/mae 4/27/50

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United States and the United Kingdom Governments felt that the Royal Question was one to be decided by the Belgians themselves.2/ The King's Secretary, [redacted] wrote the American Ambassador [redacted] to say that the present articles were not exact, adding [redacted] statement that the attitude of the United States "has been entirely correct, if not favorable".3/ The matter was one of merely passing interest, but the fact that the anecdote was rehashed on the eve of the Popular Consultation served once more to show the pitch to which tension had risen throughout the Kingdom. B-1 B-1 B-1

b. Predictions

On the eve of the Popular Consultation this Embassy felt that on the whole King Leopold stood to receive a majority of the votes favoring his return. The Embassy guessed that this majority might exceed 60% of the ballots cast,4/ but at the same time pointed out that Belgian political leaders were not so sanguine. [redacted] B-1 (It will be recalled that the King, in October 1949, had said that if his poll in the Popular Consultation was 55% or less he would abdicate). [redacted] B-1

c. The Poll

Sunday, March 12, passed quietly. The voters went to the polls in an orderly and almost apathetic fashion. Slightly over 5,000,000 valid ballots were cast. 2,933,384 voted "Yes", or, 57.68% of the total votes cast. It was significant, however, that in two of the important regions of Belgium, Wallonia and Brussels, the King was in a minority. Although in Flanders 72% of the population voted "Ja", in Flemish-speaking Wallonia only 42% voted for the King, while in Brussels 48% thought he should regain the throne. Thus the opponents of Leopold were in a position to claim that it was intolerable for a monarch to resume power as "King of the Belgians" when, in fact, but one element of the population, that of Flanders, favored his resumption of the royal office. In contrast, the advocates of Leopold insisted that by every democratic test he had qualified; he had received a clear majority of all votes cast, he had obtained this majority in twenty-one out of thirty electoral districts, and in seven out of the nine provinces of the Realm.5/

/The predictions

The predictions of the political leaders had proved true. Leopold had not won a decisive victory in the Popular Consultation. However, the balance of forces, pro and con, were so delicately opposed that the country hung in indecision. The voters of Flanders who had been so solidly in favor of the King clamored for his return, while the inhabitants of the Wallonia area and the Socialists in the capital insisted with equal vehemence that a King restored on such a ballot could never be a symbol of union.

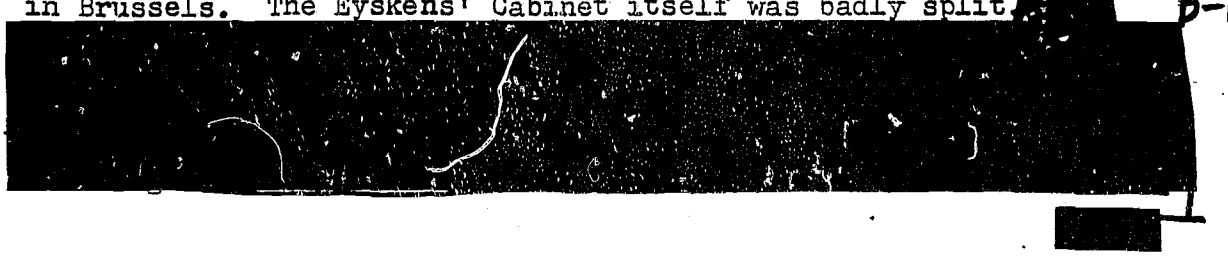
2. KING LEOPOLD'S STATEMENT OF MARCH 16

[redacted] Prime Minister Eyskens flew to Geneva on March 14,7/ where he was soon joined by the presidents of the two Chambers on March 15.8/ Later, leaders of the Liberal Party, its President, M. MOTZ; the Minister of Reconstruction, [redacted] M. REY; and the Minister of Finance, [redacted] to Pregny. [redacted] the Prime Minister and the presidents of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies issued [redacted] communiqué denying press reports that they had urged the King to abdicate.9/ Finally, on March 16, in the presence of the Prime Minister and the presidents of the two Chambers, a statement of the King was read to the press. B-1 B-1 B-1 B-1

Leopold hailed the majority vote in his favor as a "mark of confidence", and claimed that it was the more valuable because the favorable votes were given by Belgians belonging to every political party and to every class. He claimed that the results of the Consultation led him to the conclusion that the "Belgian people have shown, by an incontestable majority, their desire to see me take up again the exercise of my prerogatives despite the long absence which has separated me from them". The King continued that it was up to Parliament to assume the political responsibilities resulting from the Popular Consultation, and pledged that whatever might be the decision of Parliament he would abide by it.10/

3. EYSKENS' GOVERNMENT RESIGNS

Although Leopold's statement was straightforward and clear-cut, it did not suffice to resolve the deepening political crisis in Brussels. The Eyskens' Cabinet itself was badly split. [redacted] B-1



[redacted] B-1

ters in the Cabinet were also of divided views, those representing the Flemish constituencies favoring the King's return, and those from Wallonia areas remaining adamant in opposition.11/ At last these tensions proved intolerable, and on March 18, in a laconic communiqué the Government announced that, not having been able to agree on a convocation of the two Chambers, (to decide on Leopold's return), and this point not having been covered in the Governmental agreement of August, 1949, the Prime Minister had decided to present the resignation of his Government to the Prince Regent.12/

4. THE OPPOSING FACTIONS

There ensued a prolonged period of political crisis, [redacted] B-1 maneuvering, with an ever-heightening sense of exasperation and intrigue. The opposing factions were fairly clear-cut in their publicly-expressed views but, [redacted] were more irresolute in the B-1 secret councils of the Party.

[redacted] B-1

[redacted] B-1

[redacted] B-1

[redacted] B-1

The Royalists were led by Paul Van Zeeland, by Vleeschauwer, and by a mixture of Liberals, but not Liberal politicians, personified by the wealthy industrialist, Ernest SOLVAY.

These protagonists, like the rest of the Belgian people, were for the most part [redacted] bewildered and increasingly annoyed that all the exertions for settlement of the Royal Question had been in vain. Of the populace, only the well-organized Socialist workers and the equally well-organized Communists, took an active part in the campaign either for, or, in the latter case, against the King.

5. ANTI-LEOPOLD STRIKES

The Socialists resorted to two forms of attack, one on the intellectual and politico-strategic plane in which such leaders as Spaak and LAROCK maneuvered with accustomed ease, writing articles, making speeches and conferring with other politicians, while on the trades union level the faithful organized within the Socialist trade union federation, the FGTB, loyally went on strike at the command of headquarters. Thus, on March 17, between one hundred and one hundred and fifty thousand Socialist workers went on strike in Wallonia, knocking out for twenty-four hours the heavy industry in Charleroi, Liège and the Borinage. This was but a rehearsal for full-scale strikes to come.

[redacted] B-1

It was significant, however, that the important Catholic labor federation, the CSC, was steadfastly pro-King and that the Catholic unions controlled the labor situation throughout pro-Leopold Flanders. In other words, the Socialist threat of a nation-wide strike was almost by definition eliminated from realization, as the largest element of the population and, therefore, of organized labor, was for the King.

Nevertheless, the FGTB continued its plans; a rehearsal strike at Antwerp on March 20 tied up between 80% and 90% of the stevedores in Europe's largest port;[14] and a general strike for Wallonia and for the Province of Brabant, in which Brussels is situated, was called for March 24.[15]

[redacted] B-1

[redacted] B-1

The general strike of March 24, in terms of political effect, was a fiasco. Although the heavy industry at Liège was completely stopped, rail transportation throughout the country was normal, Government workers hesitated to follow the strike call, and life in Brussels went on uneventfully except for the lack of the usual number of street cars.17/

[redacted] B-1

[redacted] B-1

6. ENDEAVORS TO FORM A GOVERNMENT

a. Carton de Wiart

After the Eyskens Cabinet resigned on March 18, the Prince Regent asked Eyskens if he could not succeed in forming a new coalition government. This effort was short-lived, and on March 22 the Regent asked elder statesman Carton de Wiart to serve as "informateur" to explore the grounds for an eventual government.21/ The

/immediate

immediate act of Count Carton de Wiart was to call the Belgian Council of State into its first session since 1914. The Council of State, made up of ex-Ministers and eminent men, [redacted] B-1

[redacted] The Council met and ineffectually discussed the situation. Carton de Wiart thereupon renounced his task as "informateur" on March 24, and the Prince Regent then confided this responsibility to the Minister of Defense in the Eyskens' Government, the Liberal politician DEVEZE [redacted] B-1

b. Deveze

Deveze's appointment as "formateur" took place on March 25. In a press conference, he said he would seek a three-party compromise; he lamented the economic and social effects of the prolonged crisis, and added that he would seek a solution in the interest of the Monarchy, the Dynasty, and the Country. If he did not succeed he "would not hesitate to have recourse to a dissolution of Parliament". [redacted] B-1

Deveze's consultation with all elements of Belgian society lasted for almost a week, interrupted by his journey to The Hague at the opening of April to attend the meeting of the Defense Ministers of the North Atlantic Pact.[25] Finally [redacted] B-1 Deveze declared it was impossible to form a government on the basis of a "national solution" and "the rallying of all Belgians around Prince Baudouin". [redacted] B-1

Deveze saw Leopold on April 3,[27] and with his approval, the King issued a further statement indicating that the Sovereign had in no way changed his position.[28]

c. Van Zeeland

The Prince Regent now called upon [redacted] B-1

[redacted] to attempt to form a government. B-1
The politician thus chosen was Paul Van Zeeland, Foreign Minister in the hold-over Eyskens' Cabinet. The Regent asked Van Zeeland to act as "formateur" on April 5.29/

While these emdeavors were continuing, the King on April 7 issued his third statement since the Popular Consultation had taken place. This communiqué was issued by the King's Secretary, Pirenne, who said that Leopold had asked him to declare that the prolonged political crisis threatened great harm to the country; that the King reaffirmed the declaration he had made on March 16 that the decision was up to Parliament, and whatever might be that decision he would be governed by it; that as long as the decision of Parliament had not been made, the King himself could make no political decision, and that

> "it will only be if Parliament affirms the end of the impossibility of reigning that the King, thus reestablished in his prerogatives, would consider with the responsible government whatever steps the situation would require, having only in mind the interest of the country".30/

On April 8/Van Zeeland submitted a proposed cabinet to the Prince Regent, made up of PSC politicians and certain Ministers-nominate who were not members of Parliament, including some Liberals.31/ However, later the same day--April 8, certain of these Ministers-nominate lost heart, and Van Zeeland requested the Prince Regent to grant him an additional twenty-four hours to re-form a Cabinet. The Prince Regent decided that Easter Sunday should pass [redacted] B-1 and asked Van Zeeland to return on April 11.32/

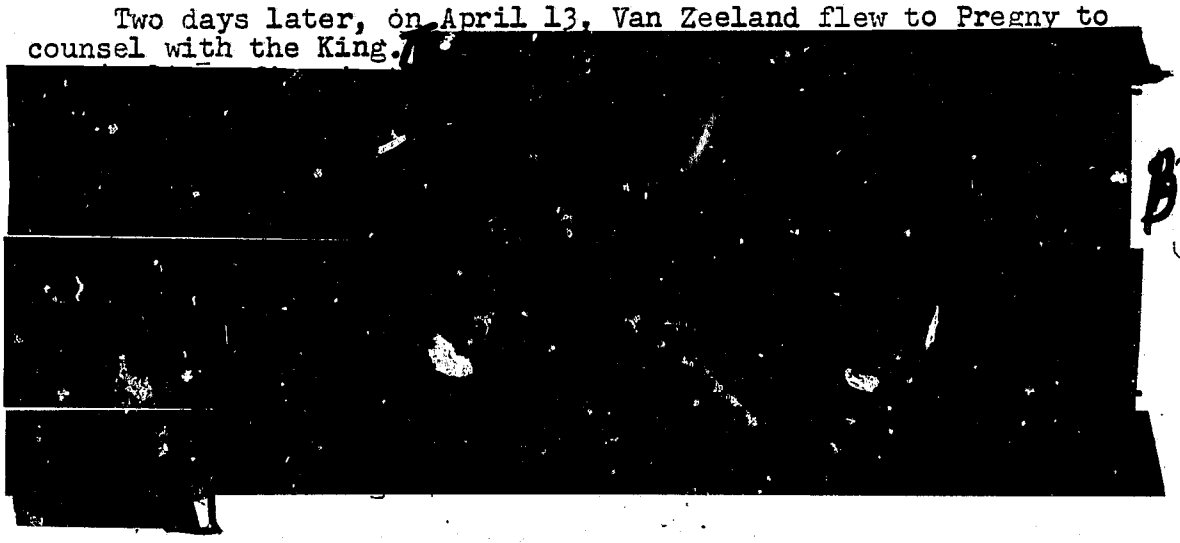
Meanwhile, the Liberal members of Parliament, on April 6, had voted thirty-four to nine, with one abstention, that they would not form part of any government whose aim was to restore Leopold III;33/ and a Congress of the Liberal Party voted unanimously on April 7 that the Party was opposed to any government seeking the unconditional return of the King.34/ The Socialist Party congress on April 10 unanimously adopted a resolution stating that its position was unchanged by the King's declaration of April 7, and called on its action committees to be ready to unleash a struggle at the right moment in resistance to the King's return.35/

Van Zeeland had been scheduled to present his new government to the Prince Regent at noon on April 11. This appointment was postponed until 3:00 p.m., then 5:00 p.m., then 9:00 p.m. At 10 that night [redacted] Van Zeeland read the following statement to the press: B-1

/"I have

"I have informed the Prince Regent of my latest interviews. I have submitted a proposal to him. The Prince Regent felt that it would require a series of consultations. He will see me tomorrow after these discussions". 36/

Two days later, on April 13, Van Zeeland flew to Pregny to counsel with the King.



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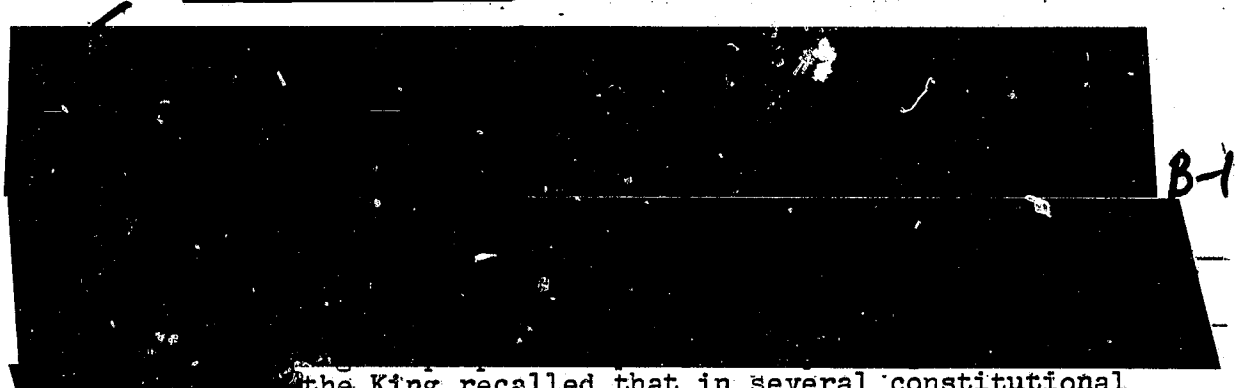
7. THE KING'S ADDRESS OF APRIL 15; DELEGATION OF POWERS TO THE CROWN PRINCE



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The King recalled that in several constitutional monarchies, notably in Holland and the Scandinavian countries, it was legally possible for the Sovereign to delegate his powers temporarily to the Crown Prince. He said: 39/

"The adoption by Parliament of such a measure, drawn up so as to be in accordance with our constitutional principles, would give me the right to delegate the exercise of my prerogatives temporarily to the Crown Prince and to terminate this delegation, with the agreement of the government, at a time which I should judge

/as

as in accordance with the interests of the country.

"It is obvious that I could only make use of this right if such a gesture was accepted with confidence by the great majority of the public. I should also have the assurance, because of the attitude of the country, that this delegation would take place in a calm atmosphere and with the loyal agreement of all political groups interested in the safety of our traditional institutions".

8. THE COMPROMISE

[redacted] 3-4

The politicians, weary though they were with forty days and nights in the wilderness of political stalemate, resumed the task of trying to iron out an agreement. What they sought was a written protocol to which the King and the three principal parties would agree, and one which would outline, step by step, the measures to be taken pursuant to the King's statement of April 15.

The protocol governing the intended compromise would provide for the creation of a PSC-Liberal Government, which would call for a decision by the combined Houses of Parliament on the continuance or not of the "impossibility of reigning", established by the Law of July 19, 1945. This government would submit a bill to the Senate providing for the delegation of powers from the King to the Crown Prince. The Senate would vote this bill within four days, and immediately submit it to the Chamber. On the fifth day, the two Houses, united in one assembly, would declare the "impossibility of reigning" at an end. The King would then return, the Government would resign, and a new Government would be formed within a period not to exceed one week. Meanwhile, the Chamber would approve the bill already passed by the Senate for the delegation of powers and, on the formation of a new Government, the King would turn over the reins of sovereignty to Prince Baudouin.

Only two stumbling blocks remained; the question of where the King should reside while Baudouin reigned in his stead; and the formula by which--if ever--Leopold might resume the

/prerogatives

prerogatives he had delegated to his son.40/ As this despatch was being written it seemed probable that an agreement would be reached on both these issues; but the week bids fair to close with the parties still at logger-heads; [redacted] B-1

Since the crisis over the Royal Question has dragged on within Belgium in the historic sense since 1940, and in the immediate political sense since March 12, we feel it wise to submit this interim report of events to the Department, and shall supplement this review by an account of the eventual--and possibly eventful--solution.

ROBERT McCLINTOCK
First Secretary of Embassy

CITATIONS TO FOOTNOTES

1. Embtel 376, March 10 1950
2. Embdespatch 326, March 8, 1950
3. " 323, March 11 "
4. Embtel 362, March 8 "
5. Embtel 375, March 10 "
6. " 390, March 13 "
   WEEKA March 17 "
7. Embtel 381, March 11 "
8. " 407, March 15 "
9. " 418, March 16 "
10. " 426, March 17 "
    Embdesp. 376, March 21 "
11. Embtel 389, March 13 "
12. " 431 March 17 "
    " 445 March 18 "
13. " 442 March 18 "
14. Memorandum of Labor Attaché, March 20, 1950
15. Embtel 461 March 21, 1950
16. " 460 " " "
17. " 485 " 24 "
    " 494 " 25 "
    " 512 " 28 "
18. " 529 " 31 "
19. " 516 " 29 "; 560 April 6; 568 April 7; Deptel 477 April 10, 1950
20. " 636 April 18 "
21. " 475 March 22 "
22. " 483 " 23 "
23. " 490 " 24 "
24. " 503 " 27 "
25. " 519 " 29 "
26. " 529 " 31 "
27. " 534 April 1 "
28. " 549 " 4 "
29. " 553 " 5 "
30. Embdesp 494 " 8 "
31. Embtel 570 " 8 "
32. " 571 " 8 "
33. " 563 " 7 "
34. " 567 " 7 "
35. " 580 " 11 "
36. " 590 " 12 "
37. " 617 " 14 "; Embtel 596 of April 13, 1950
38. " 577 " 10 "
39. " 615 " 15 "
    Embdesp.528 " 18 "
40. Embtel 659 " 24 "

RMcC/mae

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